



NCLS Occasional Paper 11

Generations approach church differently

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Introduction

The Old Testament, the ancient Greeks, philosophers, poets, historians and sociologists through the centuries have described life in terms of the ebb and flow of generations. It has been called the most important conception in history.

Based on the results from the 2006 National Church Life Survey (NCLS), this paper provides a brief introduction to some of the generational differences among church attenders. It covers:

- trends since 2001
- a summary of generational similarities and differences
- aspects of church most valued
- vision for the future
- hopes for the congregation or parish
- attitudes to innovation and change

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NCLS Research is a joint project of ANGLICARE (Diocese of Sydney), Uniting Church in Australia NSW Board of Mission and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The National Church Life Survey has been carried out on four occasions in Australia: 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2006. Twenty-two denominations participated in the 2006 NCLS.

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Defining generations

There are many and varied ways generations are defined by commentators. While more work and commentary will be done in this area by NCLS Research, this article will employ the following definitions and shorthand labels shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Generational definitions and labels

Generation Y:	Generation X:	Baby Boomers:	Builders:
born 1977 to 1991	born 1962 to 1976	born 1942 to 1961	born before 1942
aged 15- 29 in 2006	aged 30 to 44 in 2006	aged 45 to 64 in 2006	aged 65+ in 2006

Youngest show positive trends

NCLS researchers have been able to map how each generation has changed in their assessment of their nine Core Qualities of church life over five years. These Qualities are all linked to the church's health and vitality.

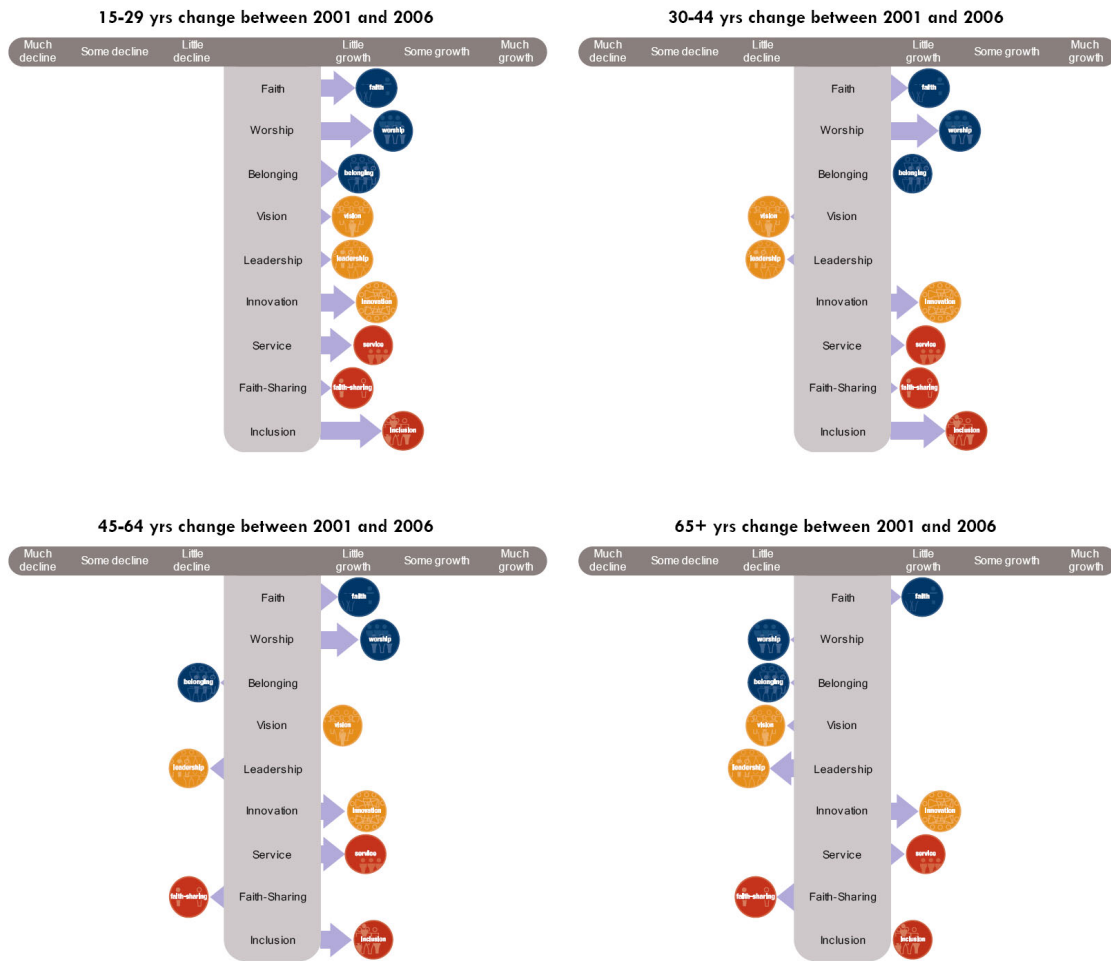
Using summary scores from both the 2001 and 2006 National Church Life Surveys, there are two key points to make.

First, higher proportions of Generation Y have made positive assessments in every area of church life than did the same age group five years ago. Figure 1 shows that all nine Qualities have a higher score than in 2001 (indicated by the shift to the right). For each successive generation, there are fewer qualities that show a positive change. For the oldest generation, the Builders, the majority of scores have actually decreased compared to 2001.

Second, when all scores for all qualities are compared across each generation, it is evident that Generation Y has the highest score for seven out of nine qualities (growth in faith, worship, belonging, empowering leadership, innovation, faith-sharing, and inclusion). The score for commitment to a vision is only marginally lower. The one key exception is that Generation Y do not have the highest score for practical and diverse service.

These initial summary findings deserve further investigation and discussion in the future.

Figure 1: Changes in core quality scores for four generations: 2001 to 2006



Source: 2001 and 2006 National Church Life Surveys

Common ground and areas of difference

In general terms, attenders of all generations share common ground in some areas. They have similar proportions who:

- have had much growth in faith in the past year through their congregation
- always experience inspiration, joy, awe or mystery in worship services
- have a strong and growing sense of belonging to their congregation
- are aware and strongly committed to a vision.

These are important outcomes of people's church experience that go beyond age. Regardless of personal preferences in relation to worship style, church size, or how various aspects of church life are conducted, all generations can speak of their positive, shared experiences of church.

At the same, there are clear and significant differences between generations. The following examples show that, in many cases, these differences are to do with the question of 'how church is done'.

Older generations are more likely to:

- attend worship services weekly
- prefer traditional styles of music in worship services
- spend regular time in private devotional activity
- have a strong sense of belonging to their denomination
- be involved in church-based community service, justice or welfare activities
- be involved in community-based service, care or welfare activities

Younger generations are more likely to:

- be involved in small groups
- prefer contemporary styles of music in worship services
- feel that their gifts and skills are encouraged
- have helped others in a range of informal ways
- value outreach, be involved in evangelistic activities, and actually invite others to church
- be newcomers to church life, have switched denominations or transferred congregations in the previous five years

Again, all these areas deserve further, more detailed analysis and reflection.

In the remainder of this paper, we focus on four areas of church life: aspects of church most valued, commitment to a vision, hopes for the future, and openness to innovation and change.

Aspects of church most valued

Attendees were asked which aspects of church they most value. They were able to choose up to three options from a list.

Attendees of *all* ages are likely to most value aspects related to the worship service: the style of worship or music, sharing Holy Communion/the Eucharist, and preaching/Bible teaching.

However, there are key differences between generations (see Table 2). A shared value of the worship service hides importance differences in the detail.

Builders, born before WWII, most value sharing Holy Communion/the Eucharist followed by traditional styles of worship or music. Baby Boomers also most value sharing Holy Communion/the Eucharist. The second most valued aspect is the sermons, preaching and Bible teaching.

In contrast, Generation X and Y are both most likely to value the preaching and the contemporary styles of worship or music. Not surprisingly, ministry to children and youth is the next aspect most valued by these younger age groups. This would be more related to their stage of life, having younger families, rather than their unique generational characteristics.

Table 2: Aspects of church most valued by age group

<i>A selection from the full results re what attenders most value.</i>	Gen Y: 15-29 yrs in 2006	Gen X: 30-44 yrs in 2006	Baby Boomer: 45-64 yrs in 2006	Builder: 65+ yrs in 2006
	%	%	%	%
Traditional style of worship or music	12	14	23	40
Contemporary style of worship or music	35	28	22	9
Sharing in Holy Communion/the Eucharist/Lord's Supper	20	28	42	56
Sermons, preaching or Bible teaching	36	40	38	28

Source: 2006 National Church Life Survey

These patterns are true across denominations. For example, the Uniting Church has an older age profile. Yet younger Uniting Church attenders are similar to younger attenders in other denominations in terms of what they most value.

Will they change as they age? Not likely... Some may hope that as younger attenders age, their preferences will change, to become more like those born pre WWII, who currently make up the majority of church attenders. While time will tell, the trends to date do not support the idea that younger generations will, en masse, decide that they like traditional worship or music. Even if the volume gets turned down, do not expect they will take up these styles of music.

While the differences in musical preferences are well known, the fact that younger generations have a significantly lower value of sharing of Holy Communion/the Eucharist may come as a surprise and even as a cause for concern. This issue requires further analysis and reflection.

Whose vision for the future?

One of the major findings from the 2006 NCLS is the dramatic increase in the proportion of church attenders who are aware of their church's vision, goals and directions - from 57% in 2001 to 70% in 2006.

In vital churches, the vision is not only clear, but it is owned by attenders. The four age groups have quite similar proportions who are unaware of any clear vision, goals or directions in their church (ranging from 29% to 31%).

However, compared to the other three groups, it is the Builders who have the highest proportion who are not committed, and the lowest proportions who are partly or strongly committed to their church's vision for the future. Furthermore, the proportion who are strongly committed has declined since 2001.

When asked about their confidence in the vision being achieved, Generation Y have the highest proportions who are fully confident, followed by Generation X. Higher proportions of younger attenders also strongly agreed that their leaders were focussed on future directions.

This points again to the challenge of generational differences. How can older attenders honour the dreams, passion and vision for the future of younger generations? How do younger generations honour the legacy, the wisdom and vision of their elders? How will the 'inheritance' be passed on?

Attenders' hopes for their church

Each attender was asked what aspect of their local church's life should get more attention in the coming 12 months. These choices speak of their hopes for the future. They were able to select up to three aspects.

Table 3 shows a selection where generational differences are most easily identified. The first pair, looking at encouraging people to use gifts and skills and new approaches, show a strong difference between those born before World War Two (the Builders) and all those born during or after WWII. The post-war generations are much more likely to want their congregations to focus on encouraging people here to discover/use their gifts here and encouraging new approaches to ministry and mission, than their older counterparts. The hopes of younger attenders to be both empowered and involved in their church are clear.

For the second pair, addressing worship service and vision, the proportion who hope these aspects will get more attention increases with age. The older the attender, the more likely they will want an emphasis on worship services that are nurturing to people's faith and creating a clear vision for the congregation's future.

Table 3: Aspects of church that should get more attention by age group

A selection from the full results re what attenders believe should get more attention	Gen Y: 15-29 yrs in 2006	Gen X: 30-44 yrs in 2006	Baby Boomer: 45-64 yrs in 2006	Builder: 65+ yrs in 2006
	%	%	%	%
Encouraging people here to discover/use their gifts here	32	31	31	24
Encouraging new approaches to ministry and mission	16	14	13	8
Worship services that are nurturing to people's faith	19	24	29	31
Creating a clear vision for the congregation's future	15	17	19	23

Source: 2006 National Church Life Survey

Innovation – my church likes the idea but...

Each generation believes their church is ready to try something new. Some 65% of attenders strongly agree or agree that their church was always ready to try something new. This varies from 63% for Generation Y, increasing for each age group to 69% for Builders.

That there is a perceived culture of openness to change is one thing. It creates a starting place for conversations about the future, which should be taken advantage of.

However, what happens when change affects one's own sphere of influence? A further specific question was asked to test how open attenders are to new ways and new ideas: "If others who worship here wanted a different style of worship, attenders think the church should...". This is not about a mythical external group. It is a question about preferences of others who worship here.

A third of Builders believe that the church should maintain the way they currently worship (32%). This is the largest proportion for any response in any age group. The proportion who chose this option declines for each age group down to 15% for Generation Y, who were more open to change.

While a minority of all attenders chose this option, Builders are also the most likely of any age group to prefer that the church should offer the one service with the style that the majority want (17%). This also declines by age to 10% for Generation Y. It can be easily argued that 'the majority' in many churches will be the Builders themselves.

On the other hand, younger generations are more willing to change their service to include other styles as well. Among those born post WWII, this was the preference that the largest proportion in each age group chose, Generation Y leading the way, followed by the Baby Boomers and Generation X.

In Conclusion

This preliminary review of generational differences clearly points to the fact that more analysis and reflection need to be done in the future, by NCLS researchers and others. The day to day reality of generational differences are being played out in churches across the country.

Overall involvement in church life speaks of younger attenders' engagement, with Generations Y and X the most likely to have increased their frequency of church attendance in the last year, reporting high levels of involvement in leadership and ministry roles, and being the highest proportion of attenders at faith based small groups. This combined with a strong ownership of the church's vision and confidence that it can be achieved, paints a picture of motivated younger attenders ready and willing to be involved in a new and innovative future of their church.

Along side this is the strong commitment of older attenders, their contribution over years of faithful service and loyalty to their denominations. Devotion to faith practices, maintaining a consistent and unchanging traditional style speaks highly of preserving a heritage, with a desire to build a vision for the future.

How this vision for the future and its realisation is worked out remains to be seen. The challenge of catering for the diversity and attitudinal differences of the generations continues individually within each church, as well as across the denominations.

The Australian church has commenced a period of generational transition. While generations come and go, this transition will have a very particular and unique character because of the dramatic differences between current generations.

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